

“Call Waiting”

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I've always disliked “call waiting,” despite its convenience. In the midst of a conversation, it's simply annoying to hear the other person say, “Can you hold? I've got another call coming in!” The interruption seems rude at best, and usually lacks the urgency that might justify the behavior. But my dislikes aside, it is a feature of our phones, and lives, that is here to stay. Call waiting builds on our fascination at being available anywhere, at any time; we become *omnipresent*, as it were, an attribute we once reserved with modesty only for the deity! Now, as we carry our phones with us here and there and everywhere, we know that we are available for immediate contact from practically any place on earth – even if receiving such second calls means that we must interrupt what we were previously doing.

Actually, God's “call” as portrayed throughout the scriptures has something of this character to it. In the Hebrew scriptures, God comes calling often as an unwanted and even unwarranted intrusion, interrupting persons who did not expect it and who often frankly feared or sought to ignore it: Abram and Sarai; Moses; David; the prophets Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Amos; and, of course, the early followers of Jesus. They were, after all, busily engaged in the work and pleasures of their lives. The same seems to be true in the accounts of Jesus' calling of the disciples: they were not waiting for such a call but were, quite literally, minding their own business – the brothers Simon and Andrew, who were “casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen”; the brothers James and John who were “in their boat mending their nets,” and others. Of course, in these cases Jesus' call did not involve any waiting or tolerate any negotiations: he

comes upon them, and tells them quite simply to follow him so that they might fish for people. A strange story, to be sure: “fishing” for people? Abandoning their work? Leaving behind responsibilities to fathers and mothers, wives, and children? Wouldn’t we warn our children against such impetuous and irresponsible behavior?

These *are* strange stories, to be sure: God charging into these lives, demanding to be heard and obeyed, and of course refusing to be put on. . . “call waiting”! In them we find Jesus collecting a band of disciples in what may seem to begin in abrupt fashion, but this unfolds as a longer journey of “education,” if we might call it that – of *formation* in the ways of God, which leads them to seek the strange kingdom he spoke about, and to pray and live as he taught, that it might come “*on earth*” as in heaven.

In Jesus’ day, of course, there were no seminaries for disciples, no accredited schools to train followers of wandering teachers like Jesus that might have been similar to what we would expect for the training of rabbis. And, as Christianity emerged within a generation of Jesus’ death, no longer as a movement *within Judaism* but as a religious community of its own right, this pattern continued: no established institutions of learning and study; no set curriculum; no formal methods of instruction. These developed over time, and this is one of the fascinating stories of western culture: the emergence of monasteries, which kept learning alive through the darkest of times; the forming of “cathedral schools” by bishops, for the education of their clergy; and, eventually, the emergence of the first universities in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, shaped as gatherings of teaching scholars and their students to explore the complexities of the emerging professions of theology, of law, and of medicine.

But these were not yet seminaries, and they were only beginning to shape themselves around courses of study which we now assume to be central to colleges – those *curricula* of teaching and learning aimed toward the acquiring of knowledge and of the competencies required for vocations of various sorts.

No, the emergence of seminaries corresponds to the first generation of Protestantism, in the 16th century: for the first time, separate schools emerged, no longer directly related to universities,

which were devoted to the *academic disciplines* requisite for ministerial education alongside the *spiritual formation* such persons would need to sustain them in their professional work.

For fifteen hundred years, in other words, there were *no* seminaries. Medieval priests did not necessarily need, and they were not yet required to have, a *formal* education. They served a different function, acting primarily as administrators of the sacraments – and, eventually, as guides for the pastoral work associated with the “binding and loosing” of sin. Their primary work involved the sacraments of eucharist (communion) and penance (confession). They stood among the people to mediate divine grace.

All of this began to change in the later Middle Ages. With the advent of printing, the rise of literacy, and the eventual emergence of Protestantism in the early 16th century, the expectations placed on clergy were shifting. The new theological reforms were shaped in part, of all things, by an ambitious revision of the “old” university curriculum that had been settling into place in the 15th and early 16th centuries. Together with such changes, there was an emerging need to fashion new sites of learning, to meet the new pressures and opportunities involved in the formal education of candidates for ministry. Johannes Sturm established a “Gymnasium” in Strassburg, 1538, which is widely recognized as the first Protestant “seminary.” Within a few short decades Jean Calvin founded what he called the “Academy” in Geneva, a college devoted to educating future clergy alongside those who were preparing for the work of public service. These schools emphasized the learning of ancient languages so that students might read the *sources* of Christian and classical culture – Latin, Greek, and eventually Hebrew. They also emphasized the study of philosophy and theology, rhetoric and history. The “practices” of ministry were to be learned later under the tutelage of experienced clergy.

While the emergence of these seminaries in the late Middle Ages is a fascinating story, it is one that carries us beyond the confines of this sermon. Suffice it to say that these schools sought to provide students preparing for ministry with not only an *education* but a *community* within which to study. They were meant to be places of *conversation*, as students gathered to prepare for their

profession within a “congregation” of teachers. Their task was at once intellectual and spiritual, educational and missional: it involved not only mastering a way of reading, thinking, and speaking but also discovering a way of living.

Seminaries have changed significantly over the centuries, beginning with the first free-standing Protestant graduate school in the US, Andover Theological Seminary (founded in 1807, after the divinity faculty at Harvard aligned itself with the emerging Unitarian movement, and later merging with the Newton Theological Institution, which had been established in 1825). What has been a constant amid the curricular changes has been the cultivation of three dimensions of education and professional preparation: first, the study of scripture and the traditions of theology as these have interpreted God’s presence and action in history and human experience (*memory*); second, the cultivation of the pastoral arts (*ministry*); and, third, the commitment to answering the call of the still-speaking God, whose kingdom is coming on earth as in heaven (*mission*). These three – memory, ministry, and mission – are the essential elements of a properly *theological* education, and they have remained remarkably constant despite taking varied forms in different periods and places.

Now, what does all this have to do with Jesus who called his first followers to “drop their nets” and follow him? Well, in one sense, there is no direct line from this informal “school” gathered around an itinerant rabbi to contemporary theological schools like Andover Newton. The first disciples, like Jesus himself, probably knew no Greek, the language of the New Testament. Given their work, they were probably illiterate, and would have received from Jesus no priestly instruction or rabbinical training, to recall the identity of the Sadducees and Pharisees, respectively. Instead, they found themselves in Jesus’ presence practicing these three attributes: *memory*, in attending to the ancient law of Moses, under the pressure of Jesus’ radical interpretation; *ministry*, in turning to the needs of the suffering and marginalized whom they met on their way; and, *mission*, as Jesus turned them away from himself and toward an inbreaking of a new era, a new way of being, a new “kingdom.”

What about us? What does any of this have to do with your lives?

Perhaps precious little, at least in a formal sense, apart from the fact that you join in the work of schools like Andover Newton by sending and supporting persons in whom you have discerned a call to Christian ministry. Perhaps you are rightly “tending your nets,” as they also were, engaged in a profession or some other form of labor – all of these “callings” that contribute to the life of the community and wider society. But we are also bound as Christians with those called as ministers to the way of Jesus, a way that involves us all in the work of *memory*, of *ministry*, and of *mission*. And it may well be that some of you, or those you know, are still awaiting the call to ministry of one kind or another, in or beyond the church – and should be encouraged to answer this call by preparing for such leadership through theological study.

In one sense, none of us really can afford the luxury of “call waiting.” God is calling each of us, in our ordinary responsibilities and in the labors by which we build the beloved community of God in this place and beyond as the people of God (what the Greeks called the *laos*, or laity), and in ordained ministries of word and sacrament and service. In varied ways *God’s call waits for us* as we join ourselves to the ways God has spoken in the past and discern together in worship and work how God is still speaking to us in our time. *God’s call waits for us* as we learn here in the covenant of this community to follow Jesus in serving others and supporting the church’s wider mission. And, yes, *God’s call waits for us*, as audacious and strange as this sounds, so that our own congregations might become the voice of our still-speaking God who promises to come among us “*on earth as in heaven*.”